Spring 4-19-2006

The Institution of the American Poet Laureate: Mark Strand and the Laureateship's Indication of Poetic Voice

Alexandra Seifert
Trinity University

THE INSTITUTION OF THE AMERICAN POET LAUREATE: MARK STRAND AND THE LAUREATESHIP'S INDICATION OF POETIC VOICE

ALEXANDRA SEIFERT

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLIDH AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DATE April 19, 2006

THE INSTITUTION OF THE AMERICAN POET LAUREATE: MARK STRAND AND THE LAUREATESHIP'S INDICATION OF POETIC VOICE

Alexandra Seifert
Dr. Soto, Thesis Advisor
Spring 2006

There is no happiness like mine. I have been eating poetry. These lines appear in the first stanza of "Eating Poetry," possibly Mark Strand's most famous poem. The unique experience of reading—of consuming—excellent poetry is shared with anybody who holds an appreciation for verse. Institutions such as the Library of Congress work to spread poetry's readership through positions such as the Poet Laureate. The position of the American Poet Laureate, however, is controversial due to the office's historical context and ensuing connotations. Originally titled "The Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," the name was changed in 1986 to "Poet Laureate," thus implying the British institution. The name's alteration proved controversial due to the name's easy comparison to the British Laureateship, which carries popularly negative implications of being an outdated position used to manufacture monarchical propaganda. The Laureateship was originally created to unify British politics and literature while simultaneously glorifying the policies and practices of the government through poetry. Today, however, critics of the position believe that obtaining the Laureateship also means sacrificing, both consciously and unconsciously, poetic originality and purpose because the position necessitates that the poet incorporate qualities favorable for national readership in his or her poetry. This apprehension of a poet losing his or her distinct identity transferred to the American office after the name's transformation in 1986.

In 1990, Mark Strand accepted the office of American Poet Laureate for one year. He had been writing poetry for decades and was already established in the poetic community; Strand published his first book of poetry, Sleeping with One Eye Open, in 1964, and in 1968 his collection Reasons for Moving gained him public acclaim, boosting his career. Yet after publishing a compilation of his poetry entitled Selected Poems in 1980, Strand quit publishing poetry for ten years, stating dissatisfaction with his recent works. In 1990, Strand reemerged into

the poetic community by publishing The Continuous Life and by accepting the Laureateship. The poetry in this collection speaks to a wider audience through an expansion in both narrative voice and thematic suggestions. During his decade-long sabbatical, Strand's poetry evolved into a form and style in which both the Library of Congress and the average American reader appreciated with renewed interest. Moreover, while his poetic voice may have gained popularity, he did so without sacrificing poetic ingenuity.

The Laureateship is formally described by the Library of Congress as "the official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of Americans" (Poet Laureate Consultant of Poetry). The Laureate's position serves to influence the national trends and reception of poetry. The Laureate is elected each year and serves his or her term between October and May and is afterwards eligible for reelection. The decision is headed by the Librarian of Congress who speaks with former Poets Laureate and respected critics for guidance while searching for each new appointee. Once selected, the Laureate receives a grant of $35,000 and an office in the Library's Thomas Jefferson building, and is expected to implement a unique program or project in order to advance poetry amongst the American public. The job specifications remain minimal so the Laureate will have time to execute his or her vision. Still, the Laureateship is an exceedingly visible position and requires at least one poetry reading, an annual lecture, and participation in the Library of Congress' annual poetry series event. By keeping the appointments annual and varied, Poets Laureate are constantly introducing unique facets of poetry to the American public. Howard Nemerov, the Laureate from 1988-1990, created workshops to meet with high school students in an effort to spread the appreciation and importance of poetry. Joseph Brodsky (1991-1992) envisioned books of poetry in grocery stores, airports, and even hotel rooms next to the Bible. Rita Dove (1993-1995, and then again as a Special Bicentennial Consultant alongside Louise

Glück and W.S. Merwin in 1999-2000) became famous through television interviews, children's poetry events, and her support for African American poetry. Robert Hass (1995-1997) organized a six-day conference on the environment while bringing together literary artists of all kinds. Robert Pinsky (1997-2000) commissioned the "My Favorite Poem Project" in which a number of American citizens were videotaped reading their favorite poem. Pinsky has attempted to spread poetry to relatively uncharted territory: outside the poetic society and into the rest of literate America.

The Controversy Surrounding the Laureateship

The position of the American Poet Laureate at a glance seems entirely harmless and completely disassociated with stain of the British position. If anything, the American institution begs commendation for its intention to broaden the appreciation of poetry throughout the nation. Yet the office nevertheless carries the burden of controversy and negative association with the British Laureateship and its historical formation. The Poet Laureate in Britain officially began when John Dryden was appointed to the office in 1668. The Poet Laureate *tradition,* however, existed long before; Edmund Kemper Broadus, in his book The Laureateship, claims origination as early as the Saxon scop. Broadus attempts to unfold the names and traditions leading up to the official title of the Laureate. He defines the poet Laureate as "the poet whose office is to sing or recite before the king," a definition which includes the scop and thus traces "to the very beginnings of literature upon English soil" (Broadus 1). In a more recent examination, Broadus pinpoints the reign of Henry II as a time when the court became the foundation for most literary activity (Broadus 6). Richard I commissioned unofficial "Royal Poets" and Henry III appointed a "Versificator Regis" (Broadus 8, 10). Most scholars who examine the origins of the Laureateship

argue that although not officially appointed or compensated, Chaucer, Spenser, Jonson, and Davenant acted as Poets Laureate. What links these poetic figures, officially Laureates or not, is their bond to the court. Each poet was commissioned to write for the king and strived to remain in his favor, and as Broadus points out, this practice was not necessarily condoned by the public: "When the Poet-Laureateship was finally established, appointment to the office was the signal for an outburst of ridicule" (Broadus 10). Essentially, the position carried connotations of being a puppet to the crown, an arousal of praise and propaganda.

As a result of these accusations, critics argue for the abolition of the Laureateship in Britain. They believe the ties between the British Parliament and the office of the Poet Laureate are negative because, as one critic put it, "the Poet Laureate loses his independence, his own sovereignty in the realm of letters, through bartering his verses for laurels" (Mahoney 233). By nature of representing the government, critics logically argue that the poet can no longer write exclusively from his or her own integrity; "the poet who does so does not merely sell his voice but, in effect, silences it; the Laureateship is a hearse, a decorative bier which marks the death of the lyric 'I,' swallowed up and entombed in the royal 'we'" (Mahoney 242-243). An article written in response to the appointment of Andrew Motion as the newest Poet Laureate in Britain quotes Stephen Spender as saying that "In our time, no greater misfortune can befall an English poet than to be made Poet Laureate" and goes on to cite American novelist William Burroughs claiming that "a flawless poet is fit only to be a Poet Laureate, officially dead and imperfectly embalmed" (Glover). Michael Glover, the article's author, is quick to point out that although poets themselves recognize this bereavement, the British public does not necessarily agree since Ted Hughes was enormously popular. Yet Glover, writing as a member of the public and not of the poetic community, goes on to lament the appointment of Andrew Motion, whom he describes

as “desperately tame” and “smarmily safe.” He ascribes this unfortunate appointment to “the way in which poetry works” by claiming poems as “closed books to any but the most ardent adepts,” and poets as “inscrutable beings who are generally regarded as gnomic and eccentric.” Under these definitions, he suggests that “genuine” poets are not fit to be in a public position such as the Laureate spotlight. Thus, Glover argues that authentic poets and poems are passed over as candidates for the Laureateship for alternative (desperate and smarmy) figures.

Fortunately for the Library of Congress, the American position was created under different circumstances. In 1937, poets first began serving as a chair to the Library of Congress under the name “The Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.” Herbert Putnam, the eighth Librarian of Congress, introduced the idea originally, and Archer M. Huntington’s monetary donations helped initiate the office; today the Laureate’s stipend comes from a fund in his name. Initially, the office served to “honor poets of high distinction who would attract other poets for public readings that would be recorded and added to the collections” (Poet Laureate Consultant of Poetry). Presently, over two thousand poets and authors are included in the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature.

Joseph Auslander carried out the first term from 1937-1941, although at that time the first title of “Consultant” was still being established. Some of America’s most famous poets have received the honor, including Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Frost, Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen, Stanley Kunitz, and Gwendolyn Brooks. In 1985 the title changed to “Poet Laureate” and Robert Penn Warren was the first poet to serve under this new title, despite having previously held the title of consultant during the 1944-1945. The office’s new nomenclature pushed to the surface negative associations with the position. Craig D’Ooge wrote an article in 1998 while working as media director at the Library of Congress in which he

points out that even before the new title, negative associations besieged the position. He quotes Josephine Jacobsen, Consultant from 1971-1973, as saying, “it’s a dangerous situation where poetry meets institutions.” Her contemporaries, including Stanley Kunitz, the 1974 Consultant, felt likewise. As a result, a sense of discredit loomed around the office, and the name’s modification in 1985 merely added to the discomfort.

Interestingly, the title’s adjustment was originated and insisted upon by mostly one man, Senator Spark M. Matsunaga. It is important to note that while the word “Laureate” did fuel criticism by association, it also promoted the position’s prestige and popularity because of its familiarity. With this newfound recognition, poets appointed to the position began to implement even more change, most notably through their expected responsibilities. Thus we see the advent of the ambitious poetry projects. Still, D’Ooge credits the new name for most of the position’s present-day criticism. He insists that “any notion that a poet could credibly espouse bohemian values while serving in a governmental position was erased forever,” echoing Glover from across the pond.

Not only do critics believe that this “institutionalization of poetry” actually hinders the creation of good poetry, but also most argue that institutions like the Laureateship “exist principally not to encourage or inspire the composition of great poems, but mainly, and unashamedly, to further careers” (Ormsby 6). They accuse the American Laureate as using the office to try to gain popularity for poetry itself, and who can argue that?—especially in light of the new expectation to implement a national project. The criticism seems circular as this conundrum harks back to the beginnings of the British institution and its own faults. Richard Helgerson, in his book-long examination of what he calls the “Self-Crowned Laureates” (Spenser, Jonson, and Milton), practically recites the same concern; these early poets “had finally

to conform to the actual body of current literary practice. And that meant linking their self-presentation of their amateur and professional contemporaries" (Helgerson 25). He adds later that "an official self is, almost by definition, an insincere self; an official poet, a bad poet" (Helgerson 48). Undeniably, the office of the Laureateship, under any name and in either country, brings an association of loss of identity and originality for the poet and his or her poetry.

The Link between Poetry and the Nation

While critics of both the British and American Laureateship logically relate a poet's sacrifice of innovative verse to an attempt to represent the nation or the court, the basis of their argument relies on the linking of literature with the nation's government as strictly negative. It is assumed that poetry written for public occasions or as governmental propaganda is neither genuine nor unique in light of its objective. Yet, poetry written by Poets Laureate is not necessarily geared towards this public end. Moreover, the linking of literature and the nation is not itself a negative phenomenon, and critics should not ignore the inextricable and beneficial relationship between the two institutions. Some argue that, in fact, literature itself fostered nationalism and nationhood, that nations themselves are "imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (Brennan 49). Benedict Anderson, a well known scholar whose work concentrates on the ties between language, literature, and nation, contends that literacy and print culture surrounded the creation of nationalism. He claims that because of print culture, coupled with capitalism through the emergence of the novel and newspaper, "a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to 'think' nation" (Anderson 22). Anderson argues that language became "fixed" due to

print; certain words, grammatical rules, and idioms were agreed upon as a standard form in order to have a unified and coherent method of communication. These "set" prototypes illuminated the differences between various groups and their respective language, and inevitably created division. Yet within this division, a coherent and shared community emerged. Literacy took this common language and fastened the group together, providing a sense of mutual experience through reading. Anderson exemplifies this expansion in audience through a person's reading of the morning newspaper:

> The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern Man as a substitute for morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. (Anderson 35)

Although Anderson recognizes that no single, concrete definition for "nation" exists because of the concept's ambiguity and complexity, for his own purposes he defines the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). It is an imagined community because no member of a nation can ever hope to know every other citizen at any point in time. It is limited because it "has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations," and it is sovereign since "the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm"—hence Anderson's inclusion of Hegel's observation about the Morning Prayer (Anderson 7). He defines the nation as community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived

as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7). This sense of camaraderie is achieved through mutual desires of similarity. As a result, the literature that creates these shared notions must also exhibit thematic or objective parallels.

This recognition of nationhood through literature explains why "nineteenth century nationalism ascribed so important a role to imaginative writers…as literacy spread and readership grew, people would find reflected in their national literatures images of themselves, as, precisely, nationals" (Reynolds 21). The creation and maintenance of this sense of nationality was crucial to the acquisition of power for countries. It was in the government's best interest to sustain the relationship between literature and this early form of patriotism, which is why the government was willing to pay for the practice. Thus, we have the support of offices such as the Laureateship. This notion of patronage, defined by Suvir Kaul as "the financial and cultural affiliations that structured the writings of poetry on public themes," was a blatantly intentional spread of nationhood (Kaul 22). Kaul notes that during the long eighteenth century, poets were extremely aware of these "motivated connections between the ostensibly nonpartisan, generalized discourse of nationalism and the particular agendas of opposed political and economic interests" (Kaul 22). Hence, this poetry achieved a national spirit while serving as a form of political propaganda—the very fear critics of the Laureateship maintain today. Kaul uses an example of ballads sung by street activists advocating laws against slavery, proclaiming that "poets crafted the imagination of the nation" (Kaul 22). Kaul is only one of many critics to illustrate the irrefutable link between national patriotism, government agenda, and literature. Matthew Reynolds cites Tennyson, the Poet Laureate in Britain from 1850-1892, as an example of how lyric poetry illustrated "what revolutionary change is, how it comes about, and what its consequences are" (Reynolds 9). Notably, poetry is a particularly useful form of literature for

creating a sense of national identity. Reynolds explains that the tie between literature and nationhood was stronger in poetry than in prose because verse "presses in on all those elements of diction, rhythm, and form which command closer attention in poetry than in prose, with the effect that, in the words of T.S. Eliot, 'no art is more stubbornly national than poetry'" (Reynolds 35-36).

Reynolds expands on Anderson's theory that language created the nation, arguing that specific languages continuously characterize the nation: "nationhood is fostered, not only by continuity of language, but by the persistence in a culture of particular usages of that language" (Reynolds 17). Certain linguistic and literary forms and constructs define a national literature and thus a nation: "analogies tie the field of national stereotypes together, to help form a culture" (During 145); writers will "employ formal literary effects in order to establish the identity of a people" (Kerkering 1). T.S. Eliot, in his speech, "American Literature and the American Language," delivered in 1953 at Washington University, extracts two characteristics crucial to an author he considers "one of the landmarks of a national literature: the strong local flavor combined with unconscious universality" (Eliot 346). The identity created by this marriage of universality and unification, which only resulted first from the distinction between nations, presents the paradoxical notion of amalgamation through discrimination, a concept I will explicate further in the following section.

Continuity through Universality: Attaining Identity through the Nation

Identity, whether racial or national, is embedded in a group's sense of unity through commonality and shared understanding, what I will call universality. Crucial to the sense of universality is that of continuity through time. Edmund Burke said it well: "a nation is not an

idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation; but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space" (Reynolds 16). Timothy Brennan pushes this theory to present-day literary practices by arguing that "contemporary fiction…is always a comment on the responsible practice of interpreting the images of *today*—how to place them, how to give them perspective, how to discuss the way they reflect a submerged history while turning it into a contemporary, instantaneous shadow" (Brennan 67). Eliot parallels both Burke and Brennan, stating that "a national literature comes to consciousness at the stage at which any young writer must be aware of several generations of writers behind him, in his own country and language…the importance of this background should provide him with models for imitation" (Eliot 346-7). Eliot's choice to use the word "imitation" pinpoints the relationship between national sympathies and the recognition of those in a poet's work. Critics of the Laureateship maintain that this relationship propagates loss of poetic individuality; yet, literary imitation, as a characteristic of national literature, does not necessarily denote "bad" poetry.

We cannot deny the unalterable link between a nation's existence and the literature that created it. In the United States this is especially interesting since America was originally founded as a colony of Britain. America's origins affect its literature, particularly when placed in context of the debate concerning national literature and a writer's influences. Lawrence Buell declares that "no American Renaissance writer can confidently be said to have formed his or her style chiefly from native influences" (Buell 593). Buell argues that Europe influenced American literature; that American literature is not a source in and of itself but rather draws upon literature of the past (Buell 594-596). Yet the claim that American literature cannot be identified as a foundation ignores the theory that each nation's literature is constantly changing and drawing upon the country's ever-present and ever-emerging influences. The voices in American

literature, albeit fathered by Britain, are nevertheless unique and original transformations of influences by a distinct and inimitably rich culture. Eliot points out that "it is of course, a necessary condition for the continuance of literature that the language should be in constant change" (Eliot 343). American English language differs from Britain's English in spelling, punctuation, and idioms on a most basic level (Eliot 342). Americans managed to develop a voice that distinguished themselves from the British, although some believe this voice is characterized by slang and dialect, accusing the American language and America herself as being a "cultural back-water" (Buell 596). Yet this new slang—this voice—is in actuality one of the defining characteristics of American literature, a characteristic that fostered nationalism and is therefore not "backwater." Eliot was referring to this new "slang" when he described a national writer as having a "strong local flavor"; he named Poe, Whitman, and Mark Twain as the figures who first fully represent American literature, rather than the literature of "New England," because of their fresh voices (Eliot 345). While the creation of America's literary voice may have roots in Britain, those roots have been torn out and replanted in newer and more diverse soil.

The notion of a national literature's constant alteration and metamorphosis harks back to Reynolds' observation that "nationhood is fostered, not only by continuity of language, but by the persistence in a culture of particular usages of that language" (Reynolds 17). This "recycling" of the nation's language creates a sense of recognizable identity while simultaneously creating new alterations that clinch the individuality of that nation's identity. Walter Ong, in his study on the relationship between oral cultures and literate ones, titled Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word, cites Homer as an example of this reverberation. Homer relied on memory and oral discourse rather than the written word to perform his poetry for audiences. Ong

describes a study of Homer's technique by Milman Parry, the scholar of epic poetry who revolutionized Homeric studies. Parry discovered that "virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition…he repeated formula after formula…Homer stitched together prefabricated parts" (Ong 21-22). This repetition of formula, required in strictly oral cultures, is frowned upon by post-Romantic standards which covet individuality and invention; it is also one of the primary criticisms surrounding the Laureateship. The reiteration, however, not only of the poem itself but of the formulas which comprise the epic poem (plot, images, character types) creates continuity through the stories told to each audience: "In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (Ong 24). Yet since this form of discourse relies entirely on memory, no epic poem could be retold verbatim. Certain words and phrases were altered for, and catered to, each new generation; still, the "fixed, formulaic patterns" remained essential for a sense of continuity and camaraderie through time. Ong, as Reynolds and Eliot suggested, believes these discrepancies can in fact maintain more accuracy, more "truth," than a word-for-word rendition, arguing that "words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habit…word meanings come continuously out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized" (Ong 47). For Ong, "what was said" is more important than how it was said. Repetition of formula and the reworking of language reflect what a nationalistic literature should be, and what critics of the Laureateship denounce.

Ong's theory relies on the word as spoken aloud rather than silently read. Although he acknowledges literacy's mnemonic tangibility in that "we can see and touch such inscribed

'words' in texts and books," he nevertheless vilifies the written words as "residue," whereas "oral tradition has no such residue or deposit" (Ong 11). Ong maintains that oral discourse establishes a stronger sense of group cohesion and universality because it creates a more powerful inclusion of the "reader" (or in this case, audience as listener). Orality creates an "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" mode of discourse. Ong argues that with both speaker and listener present, the communal identification unifies the group. He states that "whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer" (Ong 72). An individual's reaction to audible language is not subjective but instead publicly shared. This strictly oral phenomenon explains Kaul's mention of street activists singing ballads as propaganda for abolishing slavery; it suggests the origin of poetry's lyrical characteristics and points directly towards the United States Laureateship's insistence on public readings and recordings for the Library's collection.

While Ong makes a persuasive argument for the creation of a community through oral interaction, the group must necessarily be small enough so that all are present in order to hear the speaker and respond if so desired. Ong depends on a discrete audience. Helen Vendler, in her latest book Invisible Listeners, investigates the poet's need for this kind of relationship, this necessity for an audience. She explores George Herbert's relationship with God, Walt Whitman's utilization of the "Reader-In-Futurity" as his invisible addressee, and John Ashbery's contact with the "Artist of the Past." Vendler maintains that "the intrinsic and constitutive ability of the lyric to create intimacy is perhaps most striking when the object of intimacy can never be humanly seen or known, yet can be humanly addressed. In such a case, the unseen other becomes an unseen listener, anchoring the voice of the poet as it issues into the otherwise vacant air"

(Vendler 4). When an audience is absent, the poet still craves this oral mode of discourse, complete with listener and response. The response, of course, is readership.

Anderson's contention that literacy unifies groups is vastly more applicable to an entire nation. His illustration of the reading of the morning papers exemplifies this. Even Ong, who maintains that "writing introduces division and alienation" due to his belief that "print created a new sense of the private ownership of words," admits that print also creates "a higher sense of unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is conscious-raising" (Ong 179, 131, 179). Literacy allows the reader to internalize that language through words while simultaneously recognizing this act of reading as shared with members of the community (the nation) he or she doesn't know, thus creating a broader and more cohesive unification. It is because of literacy that we become aware of the world outside "ear-shot."

Anderson describes the nation—the national imagination—as a "horizontal comradeship." He argues that before the advent of print culture, pre-national communities existed as religious communities and socially stratified groups, both of which are vertical constructs. The literate included only a select few, namely the wealthy, the royalty, and those in the highest positions in the Church: "the fundamental conceptions about 'social groups' were centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal" (Anderson 15). The horizontal camaraderie that stems from national patriotism allows an individual to identify himself or herself as a part of the group, rather than to identify himself or herself through the isolation of separate hierarchies. This shared, level plane explains the phenomenon of a person willing to die for his or her country. Anderson asserts that "no more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than the cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers"

(Anderson 9). The lack of identity for each individual honored is irrelevant because he or she identifies with the nation. Since the nation will not die, the soldier is, in a way, immortal. Anderson states that the nation's preoccupation with death and immortality "suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings" (Anderson 10). Religion attempts to explain the necessity of mortality and the relationship between life, existence, and the nature of the world. "With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear…What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" (Anderson 11). Nationalism fills the role of continuity as religious immortality receded.

Anderson is careful to note that nationalism cannot dissipate into one shared, global sentiment. While particular languages can die or combine into one another, he argues that there "is no possibility of humankind's general linguistic unification," both realistically and conceptually (Anderson 43). Since languages will never combine into one common and homogenous mode of discourse, the unification that emerges within nations, as a result of the multiplicity of languages, guarantees distinct nations. Therefore identity within a nation-group—through shared experience and shared readership—secures immortality through a sense of continuity if one identifies oneself as a national. Anderson suggests that when "English-speakers hear the words 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'—created almost four-and-a-half centuries ago—they get a ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogeneous, empty time" (Anderson 145). He also notes the singing of the national anthem, and the significance of the act of singing concurrently: "At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody," thus creating the physical echoes of the imagined

community (Anderson 145). As Helen Vendler rationalizes, “intimacy with the invisible is an intimacy with hope” (Vendler 8). National literature offers this intimacy through language.

“The Continuous Life”

The position of Poet Laureate provides an official link between poetry and the nation through the Library of Congress. Mark Strand’s poem “The Continuous Life” exhibits elements parallel to the way in which literacy, orality, and national patriotism interact. This poem was published in 1990, the year he became Poet Laureate, in the collection The Continuous Life, Strand’s first book of poetry since 1980. The title of the poem itself suggests a meditation on the attainment of continuity or a type of immortality. Strand once commented on “The Continuous Life,” saying:

> That’s an important poem for me. It was an attempt to be as straightforward about family life as I could possibly be. We all know that our children are waiting to take over. There is that suspicion we have, especially as they grow older, and become impatient with us. And it’s not a bad thing. It’s just that we want to say to them, ‘Wait a second. We’re not through yet. We like it here.’ And it’s hard to come out and say it in a poem. It seems so corny. And to a degree my poem is corny, but I slip away from it at the end and another element comes in. (Kelen 78-79)

Strand’s suggestion of continuity through family is reflected in the poem, yet the element in the end illuminates Strand’s new expansive voice.

The poem begins with a question of domestic roles and the passing of those responsibilities with time: “What of the neighborhood homes awash / In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes, / Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender, / Signs that the irregular

pleasures of moving / From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty, / Have run their course?...” (1. 1-6). The image of children playing outside the bushes brings to mind the suburban life in America, where chores are a daily responsibility and a great significance is placed on the family’s link between parent and child. By using the phrases “hunched in the bushes” and “signs of surrender,” Strand does suggest that the children are “impatiently waiting to take over.” But the tone is also aggressive by implying a sneaky attack; they are “hunched” and “watching” for “surrender.” In effect, Strand issues a caution, a call to awareness.

This advisory expands in the following lines: “Oh parents, confess / To your little ones the night is a long way off / And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them / Your worship of household chores has barely begun; / Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops; / Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do” (l. 6-11). Strand uses imperative verbs such as “confess,” “tell,” “describe,” and “say” to instruct the reader. Through this order, Strand brings the reader into the poem and the poetic experience. He identifies readers as “parents” and directly asks them to speak to their children about the characteristics of an adult’s daily life. Yet the complexity of tone creates a deeper implication. Strand seems to issue a warning about growing up too quickly because the parents aren’t through with their own role yet (harking back to his own comment about parents’ insecurity about their children waiting to take on this role themselves) while simultaneously praising the monotony of chores. Critics have read this section as an illustration of Strand’s new expansive voice and have pinned these lines as more “American.” Catherine Coles stated that “‘The Continuous Life’ seems familial in the sense of responsibility. Maybe that’s one of the ways in which it’s continuous” (Coles 14). Christopher Benfey focuses on the images of the chores and tools, arguing that “this praise of the ordinary has deep roots in American writing, from Emerson to Stevens and on to Ashbery.

Strand's new voice is audible here—ruminative, accepting, gently self-mocking." The analogy that ties hard work (the path towards the "America Dream") to praise of the ordinary (honorable humility) is characteristically American. So while the praise of the ordinary may be a celebration of the lot in life for a suburban American, Benfey picks up on the ironic voice, thus revealing a more applicable reading. The "self-mocking" echoes Strand's own description of the poem as "corny" because the hyperbolic praise doubly serves as both a celebration and condemnation of this life. The word "confess" is curious here, as if Strand is suggesting that parents keep their secret joy for chores hidden. Thus the parents are portrayed as hypocritical by telling their children not to grow up too quickly because these very chores are what they'll have to look forward to when they do assume the role of adult. The hypocrisy lies in the confession that the parents, in fact, "worship" the mundane. In this case, the parents' reluctant acknowledgement of the children as waiting in line would be a kind of passing of the torch, a continuity achieved through, as Coles put it, "familial responsibility."

However, reading these lines as a selfish reluctance on the part of the parents ignores the sarcasm drenched throughout. Through his derisive language, Strand reveals the unglamorous characteristics of the adult day-to-day life; the lines act as criticism, a condemnation. He even admits that he describes "irregular pleasures." By using the phrase "your taste for the mundane grows," Strand suggests an acquired taste, one that is not apparent at first because the subject is initially disliked. While this places a shadow on the mundane, the earlier mention of "being adrift on the swell of duty" covers the chores in a veil of detested responsibility. "Swell" brings to mind an amassing and increasing amount of force and gives the connotation of impending inevitability. The chores intensify and "there will always be cooking and cleaning to do." Nevertheless, this phrase can be interpreted as a comfort to the children that when their time

comes to play the adult role, they, too, will have the opportunity—the *pleasure*—to "worship" the mundane. Yet the phrase also echoes a commonly uttered complaint and thus serves as a cap to the lines, reassuring the reader of the accuracy of his or her sarcastic interpretation. A person worships something of choice, a deity, a nation, a well-adjusted family—not a required duty. But when Strand chooses to praise the mundane, he mocks the entire practice of worship by listing tools (particularly those associated with ground-work), so as to evoke a connotation of lowliness. If these lines are in fact a playful criticism of the tediousness of the everyday, then Strand's real argument for the parents is that the children should remain children for as long as possible, because *this* is what they have to look forward to, and it is comically depressing.

The imperative call to the reader to "confess," "tell," "describe," "say," and "explain" this revelation to the children is interesting because Strand uses verbs that ask for no documentation or any evidence at all. Each of these words is exclusively intended for oral discourse in this context and therefore there would be no written record of the parents ever telling the children about the mundane. This could mean that Strand undervalues the humdrum of life so much that he finds its continuance unnecessary. That the oral torch, once passed, can extinguish without much consequence. Yet this interpretation is flawed because by creating the poem itself, Strand has provided a written record in published black ink. Therefore, the significance of the request for a vocal response is more likely explained by the effect of the audibility of that response. Applicable to the result of audible interaction is Ong's theory on orality, particularly its unifying powers within an isolated group. Additionally, each reader's conversation with his or her child would differ due to the various dialects, slang, and education of the parent. As a result, the diversity of voices acts as a unifier within the addressed group because of the unique nature of each conversation, just as Ong's theory relies on the unique

nature of each group's response. A family's continuity depends on the individual voice of the parent; in a way it relies on his or her own "local flavor" as Eliot described it. Yet through generations, the exact words and phrases will change with the language's variations; just as the identity of a nation adapts, so does the family story. Nevertheless, a child carries on his or her parents' verbal characteristics and as a result a legacy resides not only in what is said but also in who said it. So, if the significance of the voiced action depends on the continuity of families, a new responsibility emerges: that of the children to carry on the lessons of their parents.

Thus far in the poem, the responsibility was placed on the parents to confess to their children that there is no hurry to grow up. Now the responsibility shifts to the offspring, asking them in turn to heed the advice of their parents once they assume the parental role: a microcosmic suggestion of a parent's immortality relying on his or her children. By portraying the device as an oral one, Strand recognizes the ambiguity of the connection (seeing as there is no written "residue"), but still does not underestimate the link's existence. He asks the parents to "…Tell the children to come inside, / That your search goes on for something you lost—a name, / a family album that fell from its own small matter / Into another, a piece of the dark that might have been yours, / You don't really know…" (l.19-23). The poetic voice reveals a sense of disorientation, insinuating that the reader feels misplaced within the world and is searching for continuity through his or her own family line for a purpose or placement. Strand suggests that the reader doesn't "really know" about his or her past, that the parents of his generation did not leave a legacy, which is why he begs the reader now with "Oh parents, confess." Yet perhaps Strand suggests that family continuity is not enough, that the poet still feels lost, searching for something more.

This preoccupation with legacy and familial continuity reveals an even larger uncertainty, that of immortality. While Strand suggests the eternal possibilities through one's children, he also addresses the hope for something more after this life, which is where, as Strand put it, "another element comes in" to the poem:

> Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
> With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
> Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
> Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
> It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
> You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
> To prove you existed… (1.13-18)

The two great darks are the unknown; the state before life is the first great dark, which ends with birth, while the second, death, has no ending. Strand designates birth, and thus the opportunity for life, as "the luckiest thing" while exposing the uncertainty coupled with that statement immediately afterwards. Consequently, "luckiest thing" feels sarcastic if, in fact, life is characterized by the fear of "slipping away with nothing completed, nothing to prove you existed." The phrase resonates in tone from Strand's praise of the mundane, and the line "nothing to prove you existed" calls upon the vocal actions of the parents; nothing will prove their existence except for their children.

The necessity of this continuity is not only revealed in the denotative analysis of the words in the poem, but also through the rhythm which develops throughout. The poem is written in free verse and its line length is fairly consistent from beginning to end, which triggers a consistently swift rhythm. Strand opens the poem with a question, which naturally calls for a

pause, but then moves to the descriptions “that one thing leads to another, which leads to another,” “…that you live in a blur / Of hours and days, months and years…” that “you are slipping away…” “that your search goes on…” (l. 12, 15-16, 18, 20, 23-24). These phrases build in pace and render Strand’s description of life as ephemeral. If “one thing leads to another” then this perception of continuity is linear, but as a “blur” in which one is “slipping away,” and searching for something, the concept reveals itself as the past pushing up against the future while disregarding the present. Being “adrift on the swell of duty” and searching for a name or family album “that fell from its own small matter into another” reinforces this overlap of ever-distant past and impending future. Strand describes the readers, the parents, as trying to keep busy, which implies a tendency to preoccupy oneself with the mundane so as to pass time. Strand presents a paradox of this life: while we are worried with the legacy before us and the legacy we leave behind when we finally move into the next “dark,” we forget the present, today, the *here and now*. Therefore, he asks the parents to take his advice and tell the children not to grow up too quickly because the adult role is characterized by the monotony of responsibility and nobody really enjoys it, much less worships it. The parents should simultaneously listen to their own advice and not frivolously pass the time but rather live in the present, exist in the here and now instead of the past or the future. Accordingly, Strand’s ironic and insightfully playful tone makes sense; he himself is having fun with the poem. If the readers pursue this philosophy then Strand is right: the luckiest thing is having been born. *That* is a legacy worth leaving.

Strand’s repetition of the word “that” creates an authoritative sense of imminent truths. Strand’s confident posture reflects a characteristically American “writer’s need to gain the people’s confidence, to become, for a moment, their representative” (Patterson xv). Mark R. Patterson describes “a representative scene in American literature…staged as a political drama,

as would-be leaders seek to gain authority while the people guard their independence and autonomy, this scene is acted out essentially in literary terms" (Patterson xv). He cites Melville, Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, and Twain as exemplifying these scenes. Mark Strand's didactic tone and repeated "that" epitomize Patterson's statement concerning the sometimes obsessive need to gain influence. Strand's insistence on the continuity of life begs for a reliable poet since the poem is posed to a reader who needs convincing.

Once the qualities of appreciating the present are recognized, then there is no longer any hurry for the parents to pass on their role. Strand stated that the reader wants to tell his or her child, "Wait a second. We're not through yet. We like it here." The condition of death is uncertain but life is known and, in a way, manageable. One can choose to disregard the invisible chains of the mundane and instead learn "…to lean down close and hear / The careless breathing of the earth and feel its available / Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending / Small tremors of love through your brief, / Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond" (l. 24-28). The word "undeniable" indicates the concrete truth of existence: that life is indeed brief yet too worthy or valuable to be wasted on the mundane or the preoccupation with the past and future. The earth, however, is characterized by a "careless breathing"; it is steady and doubles as a metaphor for the thoughtless passing of time. It continues to move, recklessly and constantly, while completely out of the reader's control. What the reader must do, then, is maintain his or her time and how it is spent. Strand again suggests a state of awareness just as in the beginning of the poem; he proposes that the plural "you" as reader pay attention and "lean down close and hear…feel its available languor come over you." With this kind of contact to the present, one can truly love—even worship—his or her brief life and undeniable self. Strand concludes the poem with the phrase "into your days, and beyond," which reassures the reader that concentrating on

the present will not take away from the future. The acknowledgement of the “small tremors of love” slows down the pace; “tremor” evokes a moment characterized by a pause, by the recognition of experience, however fleeting. As a result of enjoying your life and informing your children about their past (your present), the “beyond” will follow naturally.

Strand distinguishes between the unknown and life through light imagery. He describes life as existing “between two great darks.” The search for an identity (a name, a family album) is portrayed as “a piece of the dark that might have been yours.” Interestingly, the opening of the poem mentions “homes awash in a silver light.” It is dusk, which suggests impending death if death is night. Yet lines that follow demand the reader to “confess to your little ones the night is a long way off.” Silver, a grayish hue with a white sheen, exits from a mixing of the colors black and white, dark and light. It provides an illumination that distinguishes it from flat gray. Accordingly, the poem brings to light the interaction between life and the great darks, children and their parents and their parents’ mortality, and the resulting tension that is ever-present and blurred.

This interaction is a shared experience of the group, the private family. Yet all parents and children must address the nature of mortality and the possibilities of immortality, a practice that merges these distinct families into a horizontal comradeship like that of a nation. By using the image of the dark as the unknown, and death specifically, Strand creates an impression of unity; death is known as the great equalizer and therefore the dark balances everyone. Yet in the dark, no one can see. As a result, all are equal until somebody speaks, which reiterates the importance of the verbal interaction between parent and child. The readers’ immortality—even existence—relies on voice because otherwise they have lost their distinct identity.

An individual's identity is crucial for unification through distinction as a member of the nation since America is characterized by its variety through a range of accents, dialects unique to a regional or immigrant group, and language discrepancies through class and education. In this way, Strand's group is no longer suburban America (a vertical, stratified identification) but all classes within the nation (a horizontal one). Philip Fisher, in his book on American expression through literature, disagrees that unity through diversity characterizes literary representations of American nationalism. He states that "American aesthetics is intrinsically the aesthetics of abstraction, or even more radically, an aesthetics of the subtraction of differences" (Fisher 69). He argues that by taking away culture, we are unified due to the lack of divisiveness which initially stems from our differences. This statement is embedded in an essay on Walt Whitman, who views identity as shared humanity, identical for everyone. Fisher contends that in the poem "The Sleepers," Whitman "begins to suggest the relief of having identity canceled, as soon as it is erased, we know it to have been only a burden. To be asleep is no longer to be blind" (Fisher 71). According to Fisher, Whitman believes the absence of identity reveals the true nature of humanity, that distinction is disruptive, which consequently allows him to speak for, and as, the voice of the nation. While Fisher would see the absence of identity as a small sacrifice for a more worthy, shared identity as a member of the nation ("shared humanity"), he neglects to realize that individual identity *within* national identity is the realistic counterpart. If sleeping is the act of seeing for Whitman, then death, and thus the blindness that stems from its dark, is the path to unity and continuity for Strand. America is distinguished by its diversity and thus must embrace its differences in order to unite. Strand's call for unification is two-fold: the accord that stems from the shared experience of mortality joined with the recognition of separate, individual identities allows the American reader to fully participate in the poem. Strand asks for a voiced

response in hopes that the reader, when reciting the poem aloud, will pause, listen to the careless breathing of the earth, and reply.

Mark Strand's Earlier Poems

"The Continuous Life" provides a reading experience that incorporates the reader into the poem while creating a sense of shared sympathies. The written word allows the reader exclusivity (which caters to the individual community provided through hereditary responsibility), yet the request for audible interaction assimilates the reader within a community of readers. However, this effect of empathetic participation, one facet of Strand's new poetic voice, is absent in his earlier works. While Strand's earlier poetry is by no means inferior, studying its thematic and tonal qualities allows us to further understand his developed poetic voice. Strand's earlier collection of poems Reasons for Moving was published in 1968, twelve years prior to The Continuous Life. This collection, in addition to Darker (1970), brought Strand into the national spotlight as a respected poet. An epigraph by Jorge Luis Borges opens the book: "—while we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere and that in this way every man is two men." Where Whitman saw sleep as an erasure of multiplicity and discord, Borges employs it as an opportunity to add discontinuity by taking on another role. This embodiment of more than one self characterizes the poems in Reasons for Moving, where Strand entangles himself within alternative realities to expose a different perception of the world in which we live. He does this in "The Continuous Life" but to a different end. Whereas in "The Continuous Life" Strand characterizes the possibilities of the unknown and directs the reader with methods of perceiving life and the two "great darks" that encompass life, the poems in Reasons for Moving present the reader with his individual—and not necessarily transferable—discernment of the world. Poems

in The Continuous Life ask the reader to join in while Reasons for Moving offers the reader a unique viewing experience.

The collection begins with the poem "Eating Poetry" which immediately contrasts with "The Continuous Life" in lyric voice. Instead of inviting the reader with a directive "you," Strand excludes the reader by writing in first person: "Ink runs from the corners of my mouth. / There is no happiness like mine. / I have been eating poetry" (l. 1-3). His poetry reading experience affects him so entirely that it becomes one of consumption rather than examination. Although the reader may relate to this expression since he or she is engaged in reading a poem by reciting these lines, the incident is nevertheless entirely Strand's perception because of his strict first person narration. The next lines introduce another character but still do not relate to or include the reader: "The librarian does not believe what she sees. / Her eyes are sad / and she walks with her hands in her dress. / The poems are gone. / The light is dim. / The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up" (1. 4-9). Strand's descriptions are flat and exclusively informative: the eyes are sad, hands are in the dress, poems disappeared, the light is dim and dogs are on their way. Strand does not offer a method for viewing reality but instead a look into this reality, *his* reality. Eventually, he becomes the dogs himself; the librarian "…does not understand. / When I get on my knees and lick her hand, / she screams. / I am a new man. / I snarl at her and bark" (l. 13-17). After reading a poem, Strand consumes it to such an extent that he embodies the subject: "I am a new man." He portrays the power of poetry and its effect on the reader by hyperbolizing the experience. He even exemplifies poetic method by creating a stanza filled with vivid imagery: "Their eyeballs roll, / their blond legs burn like brush. / The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep" (l. 10-12). These lines immediately follow the stanza filled with flat descriptions, thus providing a contrast which emphasizes the passionate

and kinetic language exhibited by the phrases “roll,” “burn,” and “stamp her feet and weep.” Interestingly, Strand continues to utilize this language for the rest of the poem. The energy created by the words “lick,” “screams,” “snarl,” “bark,” and “romp” represents Strand after he has consumed the poetry, reassuring the reader that he has indeed become “a new man.”

The poem concludes with the line, “I romp with joy in the bookish dark.” The word “romp” represents an ecstatic type of excitement and carries the connotation of the carefree enthusiasm of a dog. The phrase “bookish dark” literally describes the dim library but metaphorically doubles as Strand’s new reality. Through eating poetry he embodies it and thus emerges a new man. This proliferation of an identity, when coupled with Borges’ quote, suggests that if we allow ourselves to fall asleep, and consequently away from reality for a moment through reading a poem, then we will “awake elsewhere” in a different realm, one of words and their infinite potential. Strand implies that poetry is the vehicle in which one arrives at this “bookish dark.”

If we read this dark next to the implications of the dark as portrayed in “The Continuous Life,” then the new reality in “Eating Poetry” is characterized by unknown possibilities (of both words and an afterlife) and the equality achieved through blindness and the evocation of death. However, the dark as portrayed in “Eating poetry” cannot fall neatly into the same parameters. First, the new realm of bookish dark exists only because a person has multiplied in identity. So although the dark may shadow identities and thus make individuals blind to variations, the original identity still exists. Diversity might not be apparent within the group of this new realm, but it lives within each person. In “The Continuous Life,” Strand’s solution to the darkness is verbal; he asks the reader to speak, which establishes contrast within the group. In “Eating Poetry,” Strand consumes the words. They cannot be verbalized because he has eaten them, they

disappear. As a result, reading poetry becomes a selfish experience, unique to the individual who consumes it. The poem itself does not vanish because Strand embodies it, but only he can portray it now, just as he portrays his exclusive perceptions of reality throughout Reasons for Moving. In "The Continuous Life," the reader is invited to read the poem aloud, sharing the words with whoever is listening. Although the words still disappear—into thin air, literally—Strand gives the reader and his or her audience the opportunity to embody the poem with him. This invitation into Strand's bookish dark is missing throughout the poems in Reasons for Moving. One explanation for the absence of this community is what Reynolds describes as the poet's "paradoxical situation of having been published but wanting not to be understood, perhaps not even to be read" (Reynolds 11). Traditionally, a poet's esoteric qualities tend to elevate his or her work; sacrificing the "mysterious poet" element for readership is generally criticized. As illustrated earlier, critics believe that institutions such as the Laureateship generate this relegation of literary aesthetics and transform "mysterious" poets into "public" ones that are more easily understood.

Strand's primary concern in Reasons for Moving is to portray his highly individualized perceptions of reality while simultaneously proving poetry's capabilities. Since Strand argues that language is the necessary instrument for producing the "bookish dark" or alternate identity, the two are intertwined. The poem "Keeping Things Whole" illustrates this relationship between language and the realm of the other self. The poem begins "in a field" and Strand excludes the reader again by using first person: "In a field / I am the absence / of field. / This is / always the case. / Wherever I am / I am what is missing" (1. 1-7). The "I" in these lines represents both Strand and poetry, whereas a separate reading audience—a "thou" term—is completely absent. Strand, as a poet, uses language to create an alternative view and thus finishes or completes

reality. Through poetry he takes what is obvious (an observation he shares with the reader), and adds to it by filling in the holes with his unique perceptions as portrayed through language. The field is the "obvious" and Strand's created reality through his poetry is "the absence of field," or the obvious subject's counterpart. Writing poetry achieves an ultimately comprehensive vision of reality, but this awareness is unique to the poem's author. In "Eating Poetry," Strand shows how readers can become involved by embodying this designed realm; yet they can never actually own it because they did not create it. In "Keeping Things Whole" he invites the reader to look at his completed reality but does not ask the reader to share his vision.

Strand writes that "When I walk / I part the air / and always / the air moves in / to fill the spaces / where my body's been. / We all have reasons / for moving. / I move / to keep things whole" (l. 8-17). The air moves to fill his body, not any body. The language of his poetry is defined by where he's walked and what he's experienced, places and emotions in which the reader may not be able to relate. Strand incorporates the reader when he states that "we all have reasons for moving" but then directly distances himself as poet by stating *his* reason. Strand "moves," he writes poetry, to keep things whole. The entire collection, which takes its title from this poem, portrays this obsession with filling in the spaces of reality. It is crucial to note that this only offers a view, not an understanding, for the reader. Although readers are welcome to steal Strand's reality and try to embody it, as Strand has done in "Eating Poetry," it will never be their own distinct experience as in "The Continuous Life" because he neglects to invite them. The variety in the reader's response to "The Continuous Life" is part of what makes Strand's poetic voice more inclusive of the reader. In Reasons for Moving, it seems Strand is only writing for himself.

Even Strand's perception of death in this collection is less inviting than the subject's treatment in "The Continuous Life." His poem "The Dead" portrays death as concrete, final and forgotten, drowning out the cadences of immortality present in "The Continuous Life." It begins with a physical description of the place of burial, the cemetery: "The graves grow deeper. / The dead are more dead each night. / Under the elms and the rain of leaves, / The graves grow deeper" (l. 1-4). By illustrating the ground in which the dead are buried, Strand conveys a direct fact: the bodies of the dead are in the soil. In "The Continuous Life," Strand's only mention of the soil is when he describes the reader as leaning down to listen to "the careless breathing of the earth." The earth represents the steady passing of time which evokes the inevitability of death. Whereas "The Continuous Life" offers possibilities of shared experience and immortality through paradigms of identity, "The Dead" provides a negative assurance that "the dead are more dead each night."

Strand goes on to tell how "The dark folds of the wind / Cover the ground. The night is cold. / The fallen leaves are swept against the stones. / The dead are more dead each night. / A starless dark embraces them…" (l. 5-9). The image employs darkness and the "rain of leaves" as vehicles for erasure and equality. The leaves, a common literary metaphor for death, cover the ground and as a result hide the gravestones, the identities of the dead. While this sheathing by the leaves equalizes the individuals, it also robs the dead of their immortality because without a reminder carved in stone, they are forgotten; they are "more dead each night." These images suggest that the written word is not enough; only continuity through oral discourse creates a memory solid enough to withstand death. Strand, however, does not suggest this option as he does in "The Continuous Life." Additionally, Strand does not yet recognize the redemptive qualities of Anderson's theory—that the loss of separate identities would be insignificant

because of the presence of a greater, national identity. Instead of the dead accumulating more honor through time, they are deader each night.

By repeating that "the graves grow deeper," Strand emphasizes that the dead continue to move further away from the living, both physically and mentally. He concludes the poem with the lines "Their faces dim. / We cannot remember them / Clearly enough. We never will" (1. 10-12). The "dark folds of the wind" and the "starless dark [which] embraces them" cause the faces, the memories of the dead, to "dim." Again Strand uses the dark to create blindness, but this time it infects the living. In "The Continuous Life" the darkness of death represents the unknown and thus the possibility of immortality, but the darkness here shades the memories of the living, instigating loss of memory and thus the failure of immortality through lack of continuity. It is no coincidence that this poem is punctuated most frequently by periods, a resolute finality. In Reasons for Moving, even death is as solitary as the poetry.

In 1980, Mark Strand published a small compilation of some of his poetry. "Leopardi" is one of the five new poems that appear in Strand's Selected Poems. The poem's placement as concluding the collection serves as an appropriate final breath before his ten-year poetic pause. The poem is characterized by a defeated tone, laced with a resolved fear. It relates the poet's apprehension about life ending with death, and the belief that time erases everything that once existed. In this poem, the passing of time causes a lack of ancestral continuity through apathetic descendents. The images are not as abstract as those in Reasons for Moving, yet Strand still excludes the reader; he has not yet matured to his voice of incorporation as exhibited in "The Continuous Life."

The poem opens with a description of the setting: "The night is warm and clear and without wind. / The stone-white moon waits above the rooftops" (l.1-2). The image of the night

serves a different purpose here than in “The Continuous Life,” where it acts as a “great dark,” a blindfold through death to the division inherent in identity. The “stone-white moon” denies this night a quality of the peaceful, unifying dark; it is instead flooded with white fear. In “The Continuous Life” the reader is greeted with “homes awash in a silver light”—a luminance characterized by the mingling of black and white, death and life. The night in “Leopardi” does not blend with the light of the moon but is rather disrupted by it. The distinction between the interactions of these two colors signals a division between death and life; the two cannot mingle and thus there can be no life in death.

The relationship between life and death plays upon the same paradigm as in “The Continuous Life,” where life in death, if possible, occurs because of continuity through the ages, through ancestry. Yet “The Continuous Life” offers the reader hope of an afterlife comparable to promises of heaven by describing death as one of the “great darks.” The assuring poet rhetorically asks that the unknown can be anything, couldn’t it? The implication of this kind of afterlife is entirely absent in “Leopardi,” as it is in “The Dead.” Additionally, the theme of the “end” as resolute echoes between “Leopardi” and “The Dead,” while in “The Continuous Life” attentive and compassionate lineage presents the possibility for something afterwards.

In “The Dead” the poet repeats that “the dead are more dead each night” and ends the poem with the dismal contention that “We cannot remember them / Clearly enough. We never will.” After opening with the intrusive moonlight, this fatalistic concession resonates in “Leopardi.” The poet states: “…I have gone outside to pay my late respects / to the sky that seems so gentle / and to the world that is not and that says to me: / ‘I do not give you any hope. Not even hope’” (l. 8-11). Strand employs the world as a metonym for the people whom it inhabits. This assertion that people do not offer “any hope. Not even hope,” denies the notion of

continuity through ancestry—not because it cannot exist but because the subsequent generations destroy the legacy. This marks a slight departure from the restrictions of "The Dead," where the living cannot remember the deceased and thus continuity is impossible. The apocalyptic suggestion in "Leopardi" acknowledges continuity but argues that it is stained.

The idea of continuity is imbedded in this poem since the poet's memory saturates the lines: he writes that "an old wound has opened and I feel the pain of it again" and harks back to "once when I was a boy" (l. 7, 22). Yet this continuity through memory does not make the poem any more hopeful. Memory instead illustrates the destruction of one's life more clearly since the act of forgetting offers a hazy, half-nostalgic sadness while memory provides a devastating view of "what was" and thus, what no longer is. And so, themes of destruction dominate the poem:

> Things pass and leave no trace,
> and tomorrow will come and the day after,
> and whatever our ancestors knew time has taken away.
> They are gone and their children are gone
> and the great nations are gone.
> And the armies are gone that sent clouds of dust and smoke
> rolling across Europe. The world is still and we do not hear them. (l. 15-21)

Although the poet maintains that things "leave no trace" and time has taken everything away, the blame is assigned to people's tangible damage rather than "time" exclusively. The "armies are gone," and we are left with their destruction.

Interestingly, the poet says of the armies, "we do not hear them." The lack of audibility reminds the reader that this memory is nothing like that introduced in "The Continuous Life," where the reader is asked to speak and listen to both the poet and "the careless breathing of the

earth." In Leopardi, "the world is still"—it will soon be dead. Children forget to remember the lessons of their parents and the world is worse for it. "The Continuous Life" is more optimistic in the future and the responsibility and dependability of offspring. By addressing the reader and asking him or her to speak, Strand exemplifies this opportunity for sustained existence. In "Leopardi," the poet again denies a "thou" and remains a first-person narrator. Although he does address someone ("You are asleep"), it is not the reader but rather an internal addressee, "Jules" (l. 5). She is asleep and "nothing at this moment bothers [her]" (l. 6). In contrast, the poet is wide awake, conscious of this fear that life and even memory is fading. This damaged continuity results from the poem's denied orality. Strand introduces "the voice of a drunk / singing an unrecognizable song" in lines 12-13, and assigns it to a memory of himself as a little boy "…awake and miserable, and very late / that night the sound of someone's voice singing down a side street, / dying little by little into the distance" (l. 23-25). The unrecognizable song fades because the memory is corrupted since song itself is dying. Oral discourse is necessary for memory and the poet is crippled by this "wound," this fearful recognition that orality, and thus memory and the resulting continuity, is vanishing. Life is taking its last breath; life is dying. Life cannot become death, and death cannot include life, rather life succumbs to death.

The poet alludes to himself as a young boy to exemplify this failure of continuity through lineage. If he himself has failed to carry on his own responsibilities for a "Continuous Life," then he has lost hope for this method. Notably, the reader must remember that this poem is written before "The Continuous Life," and so the poet may be struggling with immortality without having discovered the notion of continuing existence through ancestry and nation, as presented in "The Continuous Life."

Conclusion

In “The Continuous Life,” Strand disregards the obscure poetic voice of his past in favor of one that begs to be read, or more appropriately, heard. He explicitly addresses the reader in a tone that exhibits “a claim for authority that defines itself in relation to social and political forms of authority,” in this case, the parent and the nation (Patterson xxv). This tone of authority creates a convinced and sympathetic audience, while ensuring readership.

Critics of the Laureateship argue that the institution encourages poets to lose originality and their fundamental purpose, their unique poetic voice. Strand’s new authoritative voice, addressing the audience with literary nationalistic tendencies, presents an ideal for the American Poet Laureate. This voice was absent from his earlier works; his new confidence and didactic tone ask to be read and recited, even if it means sacrificing his beautifully incongruous images for ones that lend themselves to empathetic reader participation. Yet this “sacrifice” for a more expansive voice does not signify a loss of poetic originality, a surrender to institutions such as the Laureateship, or “bad poetry.” Mark Strand’s poetry proves that instead, a poet can continue to develop his or her inimitable voice while gaining empathetic readers and a public office. Helen Vendler wrote that “it is not only a neutral depiction of a relation that the poet has in mind: he aims to establish in the reader’s imagination a more admirable ethics of relation, one more desirable than can be found at present on earth” (Vendler 8). In “The Continuous Life” (and Strand’s decades of previous works, for that matter), the poet searches for “something lost, a piece of the dark.” Unable to find it on earth, Strand discovers continuity through the nation—its past and impending future, the dead and the yet-to-be born. More importantly, he struggles with the readers of his present, attempting to convince them of this hope for continuity, this echo of immortality.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised Ed. New York: Verso, 1991.

Benfey, Christopher. "The Enigma of Arrival." New Republic 208.10 (1993): 34-37.

Brennan, Timothy. "The National Longing for Form." Nation and Narration. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 44-70.

Broadus, Edmund Kemper. The Laureateship: A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with some Account of the Poets. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1966.

Buell, Lawrence. "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon." American Literature, American Culture. Ed.Gordon Hunter. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 592-612.

Coles, Katharine. "In the Presence of America: A Conversation with Mark Strand." Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal 9.3 (1992): 8-28.

D'Ooge, Craig. "In the eye of the library: Poets at the Library of Congress." American Libraries 29.4 (1998): 48-51.

During, Simon. "Literature—Nationalism's Other? The Case for Revision." Nation and Narration. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 138-153.

Eliot, T.S. "American Literature and the American Language." American Literature, American Culture. Ed. Gordon Hunter. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 339-349.

Fisher, Philip. Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Glover, Michael. “Just the poet to make us yawn again.” New Statesman 128.4437 (1999): 20.

Helgerson, Richard. Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser Jonson Milton and the Literary System. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Kaul, Suvir. Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Kelen, Leslie. “Finding Room in the Myth: An Interview with Mark Strand.” Boulevard 5-6.3-1 (1991): 61-82.

Kerkering, John D. The Poetics of National and Racial Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. Cambridge: University Press, 2003.

Mahoney, Charles. “‘The Laureat Hearse Where Lyric Lies’: Hunt, Hazlitt, and the Making of Romantic Apostasy, 1813.” Nineteenth-Century Contexts 24.3 (2002): 233-250.

Ong, Walter J. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. London: Routledge, 1990.

Ormsby, Eric. “Of lapdogs & loners: American poetry today.” New Criterion 22.8 (2004): 5-18.

Patterson, Mark R. Authority, Autonomy, and Representation in American Literature, 1776-1865. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Poet Laureate Consultant of Poetry. Ed. Library of Congress. 2005 <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate.html>.

Reynolds, Matthew. The Realms of Verse 1830—1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Strand, Mark. Reasons for Moving. New York: Atheneum, 1968.

Strand, Mark. Selected Poems. New York: Atheneum, 1980.

Strand, Mark. The Continuous Life. New York: Knopf, 1990.

Vendler, Helen. Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

The Continuous Life

What of the neighborhood homes awash
In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
Have run their course? Oh parents, confess
To your little ones the night is a long way off
And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them
Your worship of household chores has barely begun;
Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops;
Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
That one thing leads to another, which leads to another;
Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
To prove you existed. Tell the children to come inside,
That your search goes on for something you lost—a name,
A family album that fell from its own small matter
Into another, a piece of the dark that might have been yours,
You don't really know. Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
The careless breathing of earth and feel its available
Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
Small tremors of love through your brief,
Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.

Eating Poetry

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.
Her eyes are sad
and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.
The light is dim.
The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Their eyeballs roll,
their blond legs burn like brush.
The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.
When I get on my knees and lick her hand,
she screams.

I am a new man.
I snarl at her and bark.
I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

Keeping Things Whole

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

The Dead

The graves grow deeper.
The dead are more dead each night.

Under the elms and the rain of leaves,
The graves grow deeper.

The dark folds of the wind
Cover the ground. The night is cold.

The leaves are swept against the stones.
The dead are more dead each night.

A starless dark embraces them.
Their faces dim.

We cannot remember them
Clearly enough. We never will.

Leopardi

The night is warm and clear and without wind.
The stone-white moon waits above the rooftops
and above the nearby river. Every street is still
and the corner lights shine down only upon the hunched
shapes of cars.
You are asleep. And sleep gathers in your room
and nothing at this moment bothers you. Jules,
an old wound has opened and I feel the pain of it again.
While you sleep I have gone outside to pay my late respects
to the sky that seems so gentle
and to the world that is not and that says to me:
"I do not give you any hope. Not even hope."
Down the street there is the voice of a drunk
singing an unrecognizable song
and a car a few blocks off.
Things pass and leave no trace,
and tomorrow will come and the day after,
and whatever our ancestors knew time has taken away.
They are gone and their children are gone
and the great nations are gone.
And the armies are gone that sent clouds of dust and smoke
rolling across Europe. The world is still and we do not hear
them.
Once when I was a boy, and the birthday I had waited for
was over, I lay on my bed, awake and miserable, and very
late
that night the sound of someone's voice singing down a side
street,
dying little by little into the distance,
wounded me, as this does now.